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RR RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHDBU #1345/01 2641426
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 211426Z SEP 07
FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0978
INFO RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 2861
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2257
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2246
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2203
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 001345

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: DUSHANBE IFTAR: A FRANK DISCUSSION ABOUT RELIGION

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11. (SBU) Summary: Participants at a September 18 Iftar hosted by Ambassador discussed the Draft Law on Religious Organizations, the mosque registration process, and the recent mosque closures in Dushanbe. Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan leader Muhiddin Kabiri and Center for Strategic Research scholar and former exchange participant Abdullo Rahnamo gently sparred with members of the Council of Ulamo, a de facto government body which regulates Islamic activities in the country. End Summary.

Regulating Religion
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12. (SBU) The Iftar guests discussed the rising tension between religious leaders and the government. According to unconfirmed internet news reports, the Tajik government has closed 213 mosques in Dushanbe alone over the last two months; there are also reports that the government has demolished four of these mosques. The government argued that these mosques were not properly registered, and did not have official government permission to function. However, the government allowed most of these mosques to re-open during the Ramadan period, which the Council of Ulamo representative argued was a sign of government good-will. Despite this concession, however, the government also destroyed another non-registered mosque in Dushanbe's 102nd Sino District community on September 17. Additional details on this rising tension, and its potential consequences, will be the subject of a separate cable.

13. (SBU) During dinner, The Tajik participants took opposing stands on religious freedom issues, with Domullo Qobilijon, Mufti of the Council of Ulamo, and Abdujagol Aliev, Rector of the Islamic University and member of the Ulamo Council, lining up against Kabiri and Rahnamo. There are two kinds of mosques in Tajikistan: mosques that offer services only on Fridays, and mosques that offer prayer services five times per day. Kabiri stated that a large majority of the Friday mosques were already registered with the government, but argued that the government requirement to register mosques that offered prayer five times per day is unconstitutional. He reasoned that individual mosques in Tajikistan should be independent organizations, subordinate neither to the Council of Ulamo nor the government. He also argued that the Council of Ulamo is technically independent of the government and has no right to inspect or

otherwise regulate a mosque. A recent example of unwarranted regulation was the Council's recent initiative to test the religious knowledge of the imams at mosques in Dushanbe. The Council decided that four imams did not have the required religious knowledge, and terminated their positions.

14. (SBU) Aliev said the Council of Ulamo discussed the Draft of the Law on Religious Organizations in early September. According to him, the Council's members opposed the Draft, which would limit the number of people that could worship at mosques. He described recent amendments to the Draft which would give local government the power to register mosques, and discussed the provision which could ban political parties with a religious affiliation, such as the Islamic Party. However, Aliev said, the Council does not have the clout to remove this provision from the draft law. Kabiri said that the Parliament had not received a copy of new draft but expected to receive it soon. He believes that the draft law is directed at Islam, and that religious minorities are only "unintended victims." He plans to put forward his own version of the law.

Social Strictures

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15. (SBU) In September 2005, the Council of Ulamo adopted a religious verdict (fatwah), which stated that women were not allowed to pray in mosques. At that time, there were only three Friday mosques, in Dushanbe and Vahdat District, which admitted women to pray. Qobiljon said that the Council adopted the fatwah because three of the most influential Islamic scholars and leaders of Tajikistan -- Eshoni Nuridin (brother of Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda), Domullo Hikmatullo (from Tojikobod District) and Domullo Muhammadi (from Qumsangir District) -- did not attend the vote. Qobiljon argued that had they attended this vote, these three individuals likely could have persuaded the group to allow women in mosques. He did not comment on why the Ulamo has failed to overturn this fatwah in the subsequent two years.

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16. (SBU) Qobiljon and Aliev were also disappointed that the new "Law on Traditions" did not allow people to conduct an Iftar dinner in the mosque. This restriction has caused many problems for people, particularly elderly people for whom it is difficult to go home, eat, and then return to the mosque for the final prayer of the night. Kabiri argued that people did not understand their rights under the law allowed the government to abuse their rights. (Note: President Rahmon recently declared that a "mosque is not a dining room," and verbally outlawed the practice of Iftar in mosques. However, the edict has not been officially codified.) Zarafo Rahmoni, Editor of the Islamic Party's women's journal, lamented the government practice of barring youths from mosques. Because her 17-year old son is not permitted to pray in the mosque, even after school hours, he meets in the evening with other young men to pray in secret. Kabiri said the Islamic Revival Party has built a mosque on the grounds of its party headquarters in Dushanbe, where it is hosting a nightly Iftar and prayers for 1,000 people - including women and children.

17. (SBU) Comment: This year's dinner was much more lively than last year's, perhaps reflecting a greater concern with continuing pressure on all religious activity. It is also possible that because we didn't invite representatives of other religious groups and only two Muslim ambassadors attended, the Tajik guests were more relaxed. It is clear, however, that government closures of mosques and bans on women and youth praying publicly has not reduced religious activity this Ramadan - just driven it underground. End Comment.

JACOBSON